

MERCEDES JACKEY

WEREHUNTER

THE FIRST NOVEL IN THE
SERIES
BY
MERCEDES JACKEY





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A Better Mousetrap

The four SKitty stories appeared in Cat Fantastic Anthologies edited by Andre Norton. I'm very, very fond of SKitty; it might seem odd for a bird person to be fond of cats, but I am, so there it is. I was actually a cat-person before I was a bird-mother, and I do have two cats, both Siamese-mix, both rather old and very slow. Just, if the other local cats poach too often at my bird feeders, they can expect to get a surprise from the garden-hose.

If there was one thing that Dick White had learned in all his time as SuperCargo of the CatsEye Company Free Trader *Brightwing*, it was that having a cat purring in your ear practically forced you to relax. The extremely comfortable form-molding chair he sat in made it impossible to feel anything but comfortable, and warm black fur muffled both of Dick White's ears, a steady vibration massaging his neck. "Build a better mousetrap, and the world will beat a path to your door," Dick said idly, as SCat poured himself like a second fluid, black rug over the blue-grey of his lap. It was SKitty who was curled up around his shoulders, vibrating contentedly in what Dick called her "subsonic purr-mode," while her mate took it as his responsibility to make sure there was plenty of shed hair on the legs of his grey shipsuit uniform.

"What?" asked Terran Ambassador Vena Ferducci, looking up from the list of Lacu'un nobles petitioning for one of SKitty's latest litter. The petite, dark-haired woman sat in a less comfortable, metal chair behind a stone desk, which stood next to a metal rack stuffed with archaic rolled paper documents. The Lacu'un had not yet devised the science of filing paperwork in multiples yet, which made them ultra-civilised in Vena's opinion. This, her office in the Palace of the Lacu'ara and Lacu'teveras, was not often used for that very reason. When she dealt with *Terran* bureaucracy, she needed every electronic helper she could get.

The list she perused was very long, and made rather cumbersome due to the Lacu'un custom of presenting all official court-documents in the form of a massively ornamented yellow-parchment scroll, with case and end caps of engraved bronze and illuminated capital-initials. Dick had a notion that somewhere in the universe there probably was

a collector of handwritten documents who would pay a small fortune for it, but when every petitioner on the list had been satisfied, it would probably be sent to the under-clerks, scraped clean, and reused.

“It’s an old Terran folk-saying,” Dick elaborated, and gestured to the list by way of explanation. “One which certainly seems to be borne out by our present situation.”

“Yes, well, given the length of this list we’re doubly fortunate that SKitty and SCat are so—ah—*fertile*, and that BioTech is willing to send us their shipscat washouts.” Vena stretched out her hand towards SCat’s head, and the huge black tom cooperated by craning his neck towards her. Even before her fingers contacted his fur, SCat was purring loudly, giving Dick an uncannily similar sensation to being strapped in while the ship he served was under full power.

Dick White could well be one of the wealthiest supercargoes in the history of space-trade—his share of the profits from CatsEye Company’s lucrative trade with the Lacu’un amounted to quite a tidy sum. It wasn’t enough to buy and outfit his own ship—yet—but if trade progressed as it had begun, there was the promise that one day it would be.

Not that I want my own ship yet! he told himself. Not until I know as much as Captain Singh. There are easier ways to commit suicide than pretending I know enough to command a starship when all I really know is how to run the cargo hold!

Not that Captain Singh would *let* him take his profit-share and do something so stupid. Dick grinned to himself, imagining the Captain’s face if he showed up in the office with *that* kind of harebrained proposal. Captain Singh’s expression would be one to behold—following which, Dick would probably find himself stunned unconscious and wake under the solicitous attentions of a concerned head-shrinker!

The Captain *had* been willing, even more than willing, to let Dick stay on-planet for few Terran-months though, after SKitty and SCat announced the advent of a litter-to-be. One of her last litter was co-opted to serve as shipscat pro tem, while Dick and his two charges waited out the delivery, maturation, and weaning of eight little black furballs who were, if that was possible, even cuter than the last batch. It was a good thing that they all *were* on-planet, too, because the Octet managed to get themselves into a hundred times more mischief than the previous lot.

The trouble is, they have a lot of energy, absolutely no sense, and no fear at all at this age. Brainless kitten antics rapidly begin to pall when you’ve fished a wailing fuzz-mote out of the comconsole for the fifteenth time in a single shift.

But every Lacu’un in the palace, from the Lacu’teveras down to

the lowliest scullery-lad, was thrilled to the toes—or rather, claws—to play with, rescue, and cuddle the Bratlings. If SKitty and SCat had not taken their duties as parents, palace-guardians, and role-models so seriously, they wouldn't have had to do anything but lie about and wait for the kittens to be carried in to them for feeding.

Fortunately for all concerned, their parents had powerful senses of responsibility towards their offspring. Both cats were born and bred—literally—for duty. Yes, they were cats, with a cat's sense of independence and contrariness, but they took duty very, very seriously. And their duty was Vermin Control.

This was a duty that went back centuries to the very beginnings of the association of man and cat, but until BioTech developed shipscats, never had a feline been better suited to or more cooperative in the execution of that duty. Furthermore, Dick now knew what few others did—that the shipscats so necessary to the safety of traders and their ships were actually a highly profitable byproduct of other research, secret research, designed to give the men and women of the Patrol uniquely clever comrades-in-arms.

These genetically altered cats were not just clever, it was not just that they had forepaws modeled after the forepaws of raccoons—oh no. That was not enough. Patrol cats were telepaths.

SCat had been a patrol cat—but although he could understand the thoughts of humans, he couldn't speak to them. This was a flaw, so far as the Patrol was concerned, though not an insurmountable flaw. However, when criminals took over the ship he served on and killed all of those aboard, SCat was the only survivor and the only witness—unable to call for help or relate what he had witnessed, he had sought for help from his own kind and found it in SKitty. When the same criminals learned SCat was still alive and tried to eliminate him and the crew of the Free Trader ship *Brightwing*, for good measure, it had been Dick's research and deductive reasoning that had learned the truth in time, and with SCat's and SKitty's help he had foiled the plot.

As for SKitty, she was something of an aberration herself—ordinary shipscats were not supposed to be telepathic *or* fertile; she was both.

As far as Dick could tell, she was telepathic only with him—though, given that she was all cat, with a cat's puckish sense of humor, she might well choose not to let him know she could “speak” to others. Everyone on the ship knew she was fertile, though—when they had first come to the world of the Lacu'un, she'd already had one litter and was pregnant with another. That first litter—born and raised in the ship—had shown just what kind of a nightmare two loose kittens could be within the close confines of a spaceship. Dick had not been looking forward to telling Captain Singh of the second litter,

when SKitty had solved the problem for them.

The Lacu'un, a race of golden-skinned, vaguely reptilian anthropoids, suffered from the depredations of a particularly voracious, fast, and apparently indestructible pest called *kreshtha*. The only way to keep them from taking over completely was to lock anything edible (and the creature could eat practically anything) in airtight containers of metal, glass, ceramic, or stone, and build only in materials the pest couldn't eat. The pests did keep the streets so clean that they sparkled and there was no such thing as a trash problem, but those were the only benefits to the plague.

The Lacu'un had just opened their planet to trade from outside, and the *Brightwing* was one of several ships that had arrived to represent either themselves or one of the large Companies. Only Captain Singh had the foresight to include SKitty in their delegation, however, for only he had bothered to research the Lacu'un thoroughly enough to learn that they placed great value on totemic animals and had virtually *nothing* in the way of domesticated predators themselves. He reckoned that a tame predator would be very impressive to them, and he was right.

SKitty had been on her best behavior, charming them all, and taking to this alien race immediately. The Lacu'teveras, the female co-ruler, had been particularly charmed, so much so that she had missed the presence of one of the little pests, which had bitten her. Enraged at this attack on someone she favored, SKitty had killed the creature.

For the Lacu'un, this was nothing short of a miracle, the end of a scourge that had been with them since the beginning of their civilization. After that moment, there was no question of anyone else getting most-favored trading status with the Lacu'un, ever.

CatsEye got the plum contract, SKitty's kittens-to-be got immediate homes, and Dick White's life became incredibly complicated.

Since then, he was no longer just an apprentice supercargo and Designated Shipscat Handler on a small Free Trader ship. He'd been imprisoned by Company goons, stalked and beaten within an inch of his life by cold-blooded murderous hijackers, and had to face the Patrol itself to bargain for SCat's freedom. He'd had enough adventure in two short Standard-years to last most people for the rest of their lives.

But all that was in the past. Or so he hoped.

For a while, anyway, it would be nice if the most difficult decision I had to make would be which of the Lacu'un nobles get SKitty-babies and which have to make do with shipscat washouts.

Those "washouts" were mature cats that for one reason or another couldn't adapt to ship life. Gengineering wasn't perfect, even now;

there were cats that couldn't handle freefall, cats that were claustrophobes, cats that were shy or anti-social. Those had the opportunity to come here, to join the vermin-hunting crew. Thus far, thirty had made the trip, some to become mates for the first litter, others to take up solitary residence with a noble family. There were other washouts, who didn't pass the intelligence tests, but those were never offered to the Lacu'un—they already filled a steady need for companions in children's hospitals and retirement homes, where the high shipscat intelligence wasn't needed, just a loving friend smart enough to understand what not to do around someone sick or in pain.

There were still far more Lacu'un who urgently craved the boon of a cat than there were cats to fill the need. Thus far, none of SKitty's female offspring had carried that rare gene for fertility—when one did, that one would go back to BioTech, to be treated like the precious object she was, pampered and amused, asked to breed only so often as *she* chose. There was always a trade-off in any gengineering effort; lack of fertility was a small price to pay in a species as notoriously prolific as cats.

Meanwhile, the proud parents were in the last stages of educating their current offspring. There was a pile of the dead vermin just in front of Vena's desk; every so often, one of the half-grown kittens would bring another to add to the pile, then sit politely and wait for his parents to approve. Sometimes, when the pest was particularly large, SCat would descend from Dick's lap with immense dignity, inspect the kill, and bestow a rough lick by way of special reward.

Dick couldn't keep track of how many pests each of the kittens had destroyed, but from the size of the pile so far, the parents had reason to be proud of their offspring.

The kittens certainly inherited their parents' telepathic skills as well as their hunting skills, for just as it occurred to Dick that it was about time for them to be fed, they scampered in from all available doorways. In a moment, they were neatly lined up, eight identical pairs of yellow eyes staring avidly from eight little black faces beneath sixteen enormous ears. At this age, they seemed to consist mainly of eyes, ears, paws and tails.

The Lacu'un servant whose proud duty it was to feed the weanlings arrived with a bowl heaping with their imported food. She was clothed in the simple, silky draped tunic in the deep gold of the royal household. The frilled crest running from the back of her neck to just above her eye-ridge stood totally erect and was flushed to a deep salmon-color with pleasure and pride. She started to put the bowl on the floor, and the kittens leapt to their feet and ran for the food—

But suddenly SCat sprang from Dick's lap, every hair on end, spitting and yowling. He landed at the startled servant's feet and did a

complete flip over, so that he faced his kittens. As they skidded on the slick stone, he growled and batted at them, sending them flying.

“SCat!” Vena shouted, as she jumped to her feet, horrified and angry. “What are you doing? Bad cat!”

“No he’s not!” Dick replied, making a leap of his own for the food bowl and jerking it from the frightened servant’s hands. He had already heard SKitty’s frantic mental screech of *:Bad food!:* as she followed her mate off Dick’s shoulders to keep the kittens from the deadly bowl.

“The food’s poisoned,” Dick added, sniffing the puffy brown nodules suspiciously, as the servant backed away, the slits in her golden-brown eyes so wide he could scarcely see the iris. “SCat must have scented it—that’s probably one of the things Patrol cats are trained in. *I* can’t tell the difference, but—” as SKitty held the kittens at bay, he held the bowl down to SCat, who took a delicate sniff and backed away, growling. “See?”

Vena’s expression darkened, and she turned to the servant. “The food has been poisoned,” she said flatly. “Who had access to it?” They both knew that Shivari, the servant, was trustworthy; she would sooner have thrown herself between the kittens and a ravening monster than see any hurt come to them. She proved that now by her behavior; her crest-frill flattened, she turned bright yellow—the Lacu’un equivalent of turning pale—and replied instantly.

“I do not know—I got the bowl from the kitchen—”

She grabbed Vena’s hand and the two of them ran off, with Dick closely behind, still carrying the bowl. When they arrived at the kitchen, Vena and Shivari cornered all the staff while Dick blocked the exit. He had a fair grasp of Lacu’un by now, but Vena and Shivari were talking much too fast for him to get more than two words in four.

Soon enough, though, Vena turned away with anger and dissatisfaction on her face, while Shivari began a blistering harangue worthy of Captain Singh. “There was a new servant that no one recognized on staff this morning,” Vena said in disgust. “Obviously they were smart enough to keep him away from the food meant for people, but no one thought anything of letting him open up the cat food into a bowl.”

“Well, they know better now,” Dick replied grimly.

“I’ll put the Embassy on alert—and give me that—” Vena took the bowl from him. “I’ll have the Marines run it through an analyzer.”

Embassy guards by long tradition were called “Marines,” although they were merely another branch of the Patrol. Dick readily surrendered the poisoned food to Vena, knowing that if SCat could smell a poison, the forensic analyzer every Embassy possessed—just in

case—would easily be able to find it. Relations with the Lacu'un were important enough that Vena had gone from being merely a trade advisor and titular Consul to a full-scale Ambassador, with the attendant staff and amenities. It was that promotion that had persuaded her to remain here instead of returning to her former position in the Scouts.

Dick himself went to the storage vault that held the imported cat-food, got a highly-compressed cube out, and opened it over a freshly washed bowl. The stuff puffed up to ten times its compressed size once it came into contact with air and humidity; it would be impossible to tamper with the packages without a resulting "explosion" of food. The entire feline family flowed into the kitchen as soon as his fingers touched the package; the kittens swarmed around his legs, mewling piteously, but he offered the bowl for SCat's inspection before allowing them to engulf it.

His mind buzzed with questions, but two were uppermost—who would have tried to poison the kittens, and why?

* * *

SCat and SKitty herded their kittens along like a pair of attentive sheepdogs when they'd finished eating, following behind Dick as he left the palace, heading for the Embassy. The Marine at the entrance gave him a brisk nod of recognition, saving her grin for the moving black-furred flock behind him.

A second Marine at a desk just inside, skilled in the Lacu'un tongue, served double-duty as a receptionist. "The Ambassador is expecting you, sir," he said. "She left orders for you to go straight in."

Dick led his parade past the desk—a desk of cast marble reinforced with plastile, which would serve very nicely as a blast-and-projectile-proof bunker at need. The door to Vena's office (a cleverly concealed blast-door) was slightly ajar; it sensed his approach and opened fully for him after a retinal scan.

"Have you ever wondered why our peaceful hosts happen to field a battle-ready army?" Vena asked him, without even a preliminary greeting.

"Ah, no, I hadn't—but now that you mention it, it does seem odd." Dick took a seat, cats pooling around his ankles, as Vena tossed her compuslate aside.

"Our hosts aren't the sole representatives of their race on this dirtball," Vena replied, with no expression that Dick could see. "And *now* they finally get around to telling me this. It seems that there is another nation entirely on this continent—we thought that it was just another fief of the Lacu'ara, and they never disabused us of that impression."

"Let me guess—the other side doesn't like Terrans?" Dick

hazarded.

"I wish it was that simple. Unfortunately, the other side worships the *kreshta* as children of their prime deity." Vena couldn't quite repress a snarl. "Kill one, and you've got a holy war on your hands—we've been slaughtering hundreds for better than two years. The attempt on the Octet was just the opening salvo for us heretics. The Chief Minister has been here, telling me all about it and falling all over himself in apology. Here—" She pulled a micro reader out of a drawer in her desk and tossed it to him. "My head of security advises that you commit this to memory."

"What is it?" Dick asked, thumbing it on, and seeing (with some puzzlement) the line drawing of a nude Lacu'un appear on the plate.

"How to kill or disable a Lacu'un in five easy lessons, as written by the Patrol Marines." Her face had gone back to that deadpan expression again. "Lieutenant Reynard thinks you might need it."

The prickling of claws set carefully into his clothing alerted him that one of the cats was swarming up to drape itself over his shoulders, but somewhat to his surprise, it wasn't SKitty, it was SCat. The tom peered at the screen in his hand with every evidence of fascinated concentration, too.

He was Patrol, after all. . . . was his second thought, after the initial surprise. And on the heels of that thought, he decided to hold the reader up so that SCat could use the touch screen too.

It was easier to disable a Lacu'un than to kill one, at least in hand to hand combat. Their throats were armored with bone plates, their heads with amazingly thick skulls. But there were vulnerable major nerve-points at all joints; concentrated pinpoint pressure would paralyze everything from the joint down when applied there. When Dick figured he had the scanty contents by heart, he tossed the reader back to Vena, though what he was supposed to do with the information was beyond him at the moment. He wasn't exactly trained in anything but the most basic of self-defense—that was more in Erica Makumba's line, and she was several light-years away at the moment.

"The Lacu'un Army has been alerted, the Palace has been put under tight security, and the caretakers of the other cats have been warned about the poisoning attempt. However, the mysterious kitchen-helper got clean away, so we can assume he'll make another attempt. My advisors and I would like to take him alive if we can—we've got some plans that may abort this mess before it gets worse than it already is."

SCat's deep-voiced growl showed what he thought of that idea, and Vena lowered her smoldering, dark eyes from Dick's to the tom's, and smiled grimly.

"I'd like to put a Marine guard on the cats—but I know that's

hardly possible,” Vena continued, as SCat and SKitty voiced identical snorts of disdain. “But let’s walk back over to the Palace and talk about what we *can* do on the way.”

SCat looked up at him and made an odd noise, easy enough to interpret. “SCat thinks he and SKitty can guard the kittens well enough,” Dick replied, as Vena waved him through the door, a torrent of cats washing around his ankles.

“I’m sure he does,” Vena retorted. “But let’s remember that he’s only a cat, however much his genes have been tweaked. I hardly think he’s capable of understanding the danger of the current situation.”

“He isn’t just a cat, he was a *Patrol* cat,” Dick pointed out, but Vena just shook her head at that.

“Dick, we don’t even know exactly what we’re into—all we know is that there was an attempt to poison the cats by an assassin that got away. We don’t know if it was a lone fanatic, someone sent by our hosts’ enemies, if there’s only one or more than one—” She sighed as they reached the street. “We’re doing all the intelligence gathering we can, but it’s difficult to manage when you don’t look anything like the dominant species on the planet.”

The street was empty, which was fairly normal at this time of day when most Lacu’un were inside at their evening meal. The sky of this world seemed a bit greenish to him, but he’d gotten used to it—today, there were some clouds that might mean rain. Or might not, he didn’t know very much about planet-side weather.

SCat’s squall was all the warning Dick got to throw himself out of the way as something dark and fast whizzed through the place where he’d been standing. SKitty and the kittens fairly flew back to the safety of the Embassy, SCat whisked out of sight altogether; a larger, cloaked shape sprang from the shadows of a doorway, and before Dick managed to get halfway to his feet, the grey-cloaked, pale-skinned Lacu’un seized Vena and enveloped her, holding a knife to her throat.

“Be still, blasphemous she-demon!” it grated, holding both Vena’s arms pinned behind her back in a way that had to be excruciatingly painful. She grimaced but said nothing. “And you, father of demons, be still also!” it snapped at Dick. “I am the righteous hand of Kresh’kali, the all-devouring, the purifier! I am the bringer of cleansing, the anointed of God! In His name, and by His mercy, I give you this choice—remove yourselves from our soil, take yourselves back into the sky forever, or you will die, first you and your she-demon and your god killing pests, then all of those who brought you.” Its voice rose, taking on the tones of a hellfire-and-brimstone preacher. “Kresh’kali is the One, the true God, whose word is the only law, and whose minions cleanse the world in His image; His will shall not be flouted, and His servants not denied—”

It sounded like a well-rehearsed speech, and probably would have gone on for some time had it not been interrupted by the speaker's own scream of agony.

And small wonder, for SCat had crept up unseen even by Dick, until the instant he leapt for the assassin's knife-wielding wrist, and fastened his teeth unerringly into those sensitive nerves at the joining of hand and wrist.

The knife clattered to the street, Vena twisted away, and Dick charged, all at the same moment; his shoulder hit the assassin and they both went down on the hard stone paving. But not in a disorderly heap, no; by the time the Marines came piling out of the Embassy, alerted by the frantic herd of cats, Dick had the miscreant face-down on the ground with both arms paralyzed from the shoulders down. And, miracle of miracles, this time *he* wasn't the one battered and bruised—in fact, he was intact beyond a few scrapes!

He wasn't taking any chances though; he waited until the Marines had all four limbs of the assassin in stasis-cuffs before he got off his captive and surrendered him.

"Do we turn him over to the locals?" one of the Marines asked Vena diffidently.

"Not a chance," she growled. "Hustle him into the Embassy before anyone asks any questions."

"What are you going to do?" Dick asked *sotto voce*, following the Marines and their cursing burden.

"I told you, we've got some ideas—and a couple of experiments I'd rather try on this dirt-bag rather than any Lacu'un volunteers," was all she said, leaving him singularly unsatisfied. All he could be certain of was that she didn't plan to execute the assassin out-of-hand. "We caught him, and we've got a chance to try those ideas out."

He continued to follow, and was not prevented, as Vena led the way up the stairs to the Embassy med-lab. The entire entourage of cats followed, and Vena not only *let* them, she waved them all inside before shutting and locking the door. The prisoner was strapped into a dental chair and gagged, which at least put an end to the curses, though not to the glares he cast at them.

But Vena dropped down onto one knee and looked into SKitty's eyes. "I know you're a telepath, SKitty," she said, in Terran. "Can you project to anyone but Dick? Could you project into our prisoner's mind? Put your voice in his head?"

SKitty turned her head to look up at Dick. *:Walls,:* she complained. *:Dick has no walls for SKitty.:*

"She says he's got barriers," Dick interpreted. "I understand that most nontelepathic people have and it's just an accident that the two of us are compatible."

"I may be able to change that," Vena replied, with a tight smile, as she got to her feet. "SKitty, I'm going to do some things to this prisoner, and I want you to tell me when the barriers are gone." She turned to a cabinet and unlocked it; inside were hypospray vials, and she selected one. "We've been cooperating with the Lacu'un Healers; putting together drugs we've been developing for the Lacu'un," she continued, "There are hypnotics that are proven to lower telepathic barriers in humans, and I have a few that may do the same for the Lacu'un. If they don't kill him, that is." She raised an eyebrow at Dick. "You can see why we didn't want to test them even on volunteers."

"But if the drugs kill him—" Dick gulped.

"Then we save the Lacu'ara the cost of an execution, and we apologize that the prisoner expired from fear," she replied smoothly. Dick gulped again; this was a ruthless side of Vena he'd had no notion existed!

She placed the first hypo against the side of the prisoner's neck; the device hissed as it discharged its contents, and the prisoner's eyes widened with fear.

An hour later, there were only two vials left in the cabinet; Vena had administered all the rest, and their antidotes, with sublime disregard for the strain this was probably putting on the prisoner's body. The effects of each had been duly noted, but none of them produced the desired effect of lowering the barriers nontelepaths had against telepathic intrusion.

Vena picked up the first of the last two, and sighed. "If one of these doesn't work, I'll have to make a decision about giving him to the locals," she said with what sounded like disappointment. "I'd really rather not do that."

Dick didn't ask why, but one of the two Marines in the room with them must have seen the question in his eyes. "If the Ambassador turns this fellow over to them, they'll execute him, and that might be enough to send cold war hostilities into a real blaze," the young lieutenant muttered as Vena administered the hypo. "And the word from the Palace is that the other side is as advanced in atomic physics as our lot is. In other words, these are religious fanatics with a nuclear arsenal."

Dick winced; the Terrans would be safe enough in a nuclear exchange, and so would the bulk of city-dwellers, for the Lacu'un had mastered force-shield technology. But in a nuclear exchange there were always accidents and as yet it wasn't possible to encase anything bigger than a city in a shield; he'd seen enough blasted lands never to wish a nuc-war on anyone, and *certainly* not on the decent folk here.

SKitty watched the prisoner as she would a mouse; his eyes unfocused when the drug took hold, and *this* time, she meowed with

pleasure. It didn't take Dick's translation for Vena to know that the prisoner's telepathic barriers to SKitty's probing thoughts were gone.

"Excellent!" she exclaimed with relief. "All right, little one—we're going to leave the room until you send one of the kittens to come get us. Let him think we've lost interest in him for the moment, *then* get into his head and convince him that *he* is a very, very bad kitten and *you* are his mother and you're going to punish him unless he says he's sorry and he won't do it again. Make him think that you are so angry that you might kill him if he can't understand how bad he's been. In fact, any of you cats that can get into his head should do that. Then make him promise that he'll always obey everything you tell him to, and don't let up the pressure until he does."

SKitty looked at Vena as if she thought the human had gone crazy, then sighed. *:Stupid,:* she told Dick privately. *:But okay. I do.:*

Dick was as baffled as SKitty was, as he followed Vena out into the hall, leaving the cats with the prisoner. "Just what is that going to accomplish?" he demanded.

She chuckled. "I rather doubt he's ever heard anyone speak in his mind before," she pointed out. "Not even his god."

Now Dick saw exactly what she'd had in mind—and stifled his bark of laughter. "He's going to be certain SKitty's more powerful than *his* god if she can do that—and if she treats him like a naughty child rather than an enemy to be destroyed—"

"Exactly," Vena said with satisfaction. "This is what Lieutenant Reynard wanted me to try, though we thought we'd have to add halucinogens and a VR headset, rather than getting right directly into his head. My problem was finding a way to tell her to act like an all-powerful, rebuking god in a way she'd understand. In the drugged state he's in now, he'll accept whatever happens as the truth."

"So *he* won't threaten the cats anymore—but then what?" Dick asked.

"According to Reynard, the worst that will happen is that he'll be convinced that this new god of his enemies is a lot more powerful and real than his own, and that's the story he'll take back home."

"And the best?" Dick inquired.

She shrugged. "He converts."

"Just what will that accomplish?"

She paused, and licked her lips unconsciously. "We ran some simulations, based on what we've learned about Lacu'un psychology and projecting the rest from history. Historically, the most fanatic followers of a new religion are the converts who were just as fanatical in their former religion. In either case, imagine the reaction when he returns home, which he will, and miraculously, because we'll take a stealthed flitter and drop him over the border while he's drugged and

unconscious. He'll probably figure out that we brought him, but there won't be any sign of how. Imagine what his superiors will think?"

The Marine lieutenant standing diffidently at her elbow cleared his throat. "Actually, you don't have to guess," he said respectfully. "As the Ambassador mentioned, we've been running a psych-profiles for possible contingencies, and they agree with her educated assessment. No matter what, the fanatics will be too frightened of the power of this new 'god' to hazard either a war or another assassination attempt. And if we send back a convert—there's a seventy-four point three percent chance he'll end up starting his own crusade, or even a holy war *within* their culture. No matter what, they cease to be a problem."

"Now *that*," Dick replied with feeling, "Is really a better mousetrap!"